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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE SITUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

I. INTRODUCTION

1. On 13 August 1997, the President of the Security Council, acting on behalf of the members of the Council, issued a statement (S/PRST/1997/43) expressing deep concern about the situation in the Republic of the Congo following the outbreak of factional fighting in its capital, Brazzaville, on 5 June 1997. The Council expressed particular concern at the plight of civilians caught up in the fighting, which had resulted in widespread loss of life, displacement of the population and severe humanitarian conditions in Brazzaville.

2. The statement also recalled my letter to the President of the Security Council dated 20 June 1997 (S/1997/483), in which I drew attention to the request of the President of Gabon for the deployment of an appropriate international force to Brazzaville, and to the relevant letters to me from the President of the Republic of the Congo and the Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (S/1997/495, annexes I and II).

3. The Security Council set three conditions for the establishment of such a force: (a) adherence to an agreed ceasefire; (b) agreement to international control of the Brazzaville airport; and (c) a commitment by the parties to a negotiated settlement covering all political and military aspects of the crisis. The Council took the view that, despite some positive political developments, those conditions had not yet been fulfilled and called upon the parties to fulfil them without delay. At the same time, I instructed the Secretariat to continue its close contacts with potential contributors to a peacekeeping force to be deployed in Brazzaville under appropriate conditions.

4. Since the issuance of the Security Council statement, the situation in the Republic of the Congo and its capital, Brazzaville, has undergone both sharp deterioration and radical transformation, in spite of the substantial mediation efforts carried out by the International Mediation Committee led by President Omar Bongo of Gabon and assisted by the United Nations/OAU Special Representative for the Great Lakes region, Mr. Mohammed Sahnoun. The recent developments and their apparent outcome have forced a complete change in the assumptions on which United Nations military planning had been based.

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5. I therefore wish to bring to the urgent attention of the Security Council the latest situation in the Republic of the Congo, as well as my proposals to mitigate the humanitarian crisis arising from the conflict, in order to assist as appropriate in transitional arrangements leading to free and fair elections and to consider the role the United Nations system might play in mobilizing resources for a coordinated reconstruction and rehabilitation programme.

II. THE SITUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

6. The conflict in Brazzaville has been marked by widespread violence and confusion, as well as great suffering on the part of the population, as described in greater detail in section V below. It now appears that, following a sharp intensification of the fighting in recent days, the forces of one of the parties to the conflict, General Denis Sassou-Nguesso, have broken the deadlock that had persisted since the onset of the crisis and seized effective control of the capital.

The course of the armed conflict

7. Fighting erupted in Brazzaville in June 1997 when the armed forces of the Government of President Pascal Lissouba, supported by his militia, clashed with the militia of General Sassou-Nguesso, a former head of State. Following a respite of some weeks afforded by the signing of a ceasefire agreement in mid-July, fighting resumed in August and escalated with the use of attack helicopters apparently piloted by foreign mercenaries paid by President Lissouba. Both sides have apparently had free access to arms and ammunition, with arms purchases often being funded from oil revenues.

8. In the past few days General Sassou-Nguesso, having captured the presidential palace and seized at least partial control of the airport, appears to have taken control of the entire city of Brazzaville amid very heavy and widespread fighting. The conflict spread to the part of the city previously controlled by the former Mayor of Brazzaville, Mr. Bernard Kolelas, who had remained neutral in the earlier phase of the conflict but was named Prime Minister by President Lissouba in September.

9. The sudden upsurge in fighting drove thousands of Brazzaville residents to abandon the city. Much of the capital had already been deserted by its inhabitants since June, when the rival forces formed confrontation lines that split the main business and residential district in two. The apparently indiscriminate or unskilled use of heavy weapons and the aerial bombardments carried out by attack helicopters during September have further devastated the city. The number of fatalities, estimated at 4,000 well before the latest and most violent phase of the fighting, is unknown. According to reports, including a letter dated 13 October 1997 from the Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Congo to the President of the Security Council (S/1997/791), two unidentified military aircraft flew over Brazzaville and dropped bombs, killing at least 20 persons.

10. The fighting has not been confined to Brazzaville, and is reported to have involved the use of foreign forces, including mercenaries. In August there were

reports of clashes at Impfondo and Ouesso in the north of the country. Information from a number of sources indicates that Angolan troops equipped with tanks have entered the Republic of the Congo and seized two southern cities, Dolisi and Loudima, near the Cabinda enclave of Angola. Portuguese-speaking troops and tanks have also been seen in the streets of Pointe Noire, the centre of economic activity and the heart of the Congolese oil trade, which has since surrendered to the Sassou-Nguesso forces.

Alleged involvement of foreign forces

11. With the reports of involvement by Angolan troops from Cabinda, the impact of the Congolese conflict on the region as a whole has come into sharp focus. Elements of the former Zairian and Rwandan armed forces, as well as elements of the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), have for some time been said to be operating on one side or the other of the conflict, as have foreign mercenaries. There have also been a number of exchanges of shellfire between Brazzaville and Kinshasa across the Congo River. In response to those attacks, military observers of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were reportedly sent from Kinshasa into Brazzaville.

12. On 13 October 1997, the President of the Security Council received letters from the Permanent Representatives of both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo (S/1997/790 and S/1997/791). In his letter, the Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, citing the death and destruction caused by repeated bombardments of Kinshasa from Brazzaville, requested an urgent meeting of the Security Council to consider the "premeditated aggression" perpetrated against his country.

13. In his letter, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Congo also requested the convening of an emergency meeting of the Council, and complained of an act of aggression involving the entry into Congolese territory of a heavily armed convoy, including tanks, from Cabinda, in Angola, and reports the aerial bombardment of Brazzaville.

14. However, in a letter dated 16 October 1997 addressed to both the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council (S/1997/802), the Permanent Representative of Angola to the United Nations strongly rejected the accusations made by the Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Congo. The letter stated that the Angolan armed forces, exercising their right to self-defence, had pursued armed groups operating from the Republic of the Congo. Following this action, the Angolan forces had returned immediately to their base in Cabinda.

15. In a communiqué issued by the Office of the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo on 15 October 1997 and conveyed the following day to the President of the Security Council (S/1997/803), the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo stated: "No soldiers of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been present in the territory of the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) since the return of a number of observers who had been dispatched, by joint agreement, to the two warring factions."

III. MEDIATION EFFORTS

16. Efforts to mediate the crisis have been led by the International Mediation Committee chaired by President Bongo of Gabon. The joint United Nations/OAU Special Representative, Mr. Sahnoun, has also been actively involved in the mediation of the conflict in close collaboration with the Governments of States within and outside the region in a position to exercise influence in favour of a peaceful solution to the crisis. Until his appointment as Prime Minister in September 1997, mediation efforts in Brazzaville itself were led by the National Mediation Committee of Mr. Kolelas, then the city's Mayor, who had withheld his own forces from the fighting.

17. On 16 June 1997, President Bongo wrote to me (S/1997/483, annex) asking the Council to authorize the rapid deployment of an inter-African force in Brazzaville. On 20 June, I wrote to the Council to suggest options for United Nations action (S/1997/484).

18. On 23 June 1997 (S/1997/495, annex II), the Secretary-General of OAU, Mr. Salim Ahmed Salim, wrote to me to convey the communiqué issued by the Organization's Central Organ for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, expressing full support for President Bongo's request to the Security Council to set up the force. On the same day, the Chiefs of State and Heads of Government of the West African Economic and Monetary Union, at their Conference held at Lomé, issued a declaration expressing its willingness to take part in an inter-African peace force under the aegis of the United Nations and OAU (S/1997/512, annex).

19. After briefing the Security Council on those developments on 3 July, Mr. Sahnoun returned to the region and, working closely with President Bongo and Mr. Kolelas, continued to do his utmost to arrange a ceasefire and ensure respect for it by the parties. On 10 July, Mr. Sahnoun again travelled to Brazzaville and met with all the parties to discuss the ceasefire and to encourage them to return to the negotiating table. On 12 and 13 July, President Lissouba and General Sassou-Nguesso signed, with certain reservations, a ceasefire agreement, which came into effect at midnight on 14 July.

20. Talks then continued in Libreville under the aegis of the International Mediation Committee, which, on the basis of a draft accord submitted by President Bongo, included the following elements:

(a) Priority measures to consolidate the ceasefire, including a definitive cessation of fighting, the dissolution of the militias, the creation of a mixed military commission and other elements;

(b) Agreement by both parties to the deployment of an international peacekeeping force under the aegis of the United Nations and OAU, and a commitment to unreserved cooperation with it;

(c) The establishment of a Government of national union responsible for organizing free, transparent and democratic presidential elections under the supervision of the United Nations and OAU;

(d) Specific measures to consolidate peace, reconciliation and national unity.

21. Despite reaching agreement on many aspects of the accord, the parties remained divided over the selection of a Prime Minister to lead the Government of national union, as well as the distribution of powers between the Prime Minister and the President and the modalities of eventual elections.

22. Following a meeting in Kinshasa between President Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Bizimungu of Rwanda and President Museveni of Uganda, and a subsequent meeting between Presidents Lissouba and Kabila, President Kabila offered, on 18 August, to mediate in the conflict and to deploy an inter-African buffer force in the Republic of the Congo. The offer was rejected by the Sassou-Nguesso side.

23. On 19 August 1997, OAU appealed to the Security Council to send a peacekeeping force to the Republic of the Congo, citing the serious situation there and the threat it posed to peace in the region. OAU expressed grave concern over continued violations of the ceasefire and appealed to the parties to adhere to the ceasefire agreements. OAU also expressed support for the mediation efforts of President Bongo.

IV. ACTION TAKEN BY THE UNITED NATIONS

Consultations with potential troop contributors

24. In my 20 June letter to the President of the Security Council (S/1997/484), I proposed the option of a multinational force established by a group of Member States that would be responsible for the command and control arrangements of the force and its financing. The second option I put forward was the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping force.

25. Pursuant to the decision of the Security Council on 21 June 1997 to authorize me to consult with potential troop contributors to a force in the Republic of the Congo, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations arranged a series of meetings with the permanent missions of a total of 45 countries from all regional groups during June, July and August. The purpose of the meetings was to explain the concept of operations being developed by the Secretariat for possible deployment in Brazzaville and to invite interested Governments to identify the support they might be able to provide either to a multinational force or to a peacekeeping operation in terms of troops, logistic support, air transportation or finance. The Secretariat also sought to identify a country able and willing to take the lead in a multinational force. Potential troop contributors were also briefed on the findings of the technical survey team sent to Libreville and Brazzaville (see below).

26. Planning was carried out on the assumption that the mandate of the force, whether a multinational force or a peacekeeping operation, would be to secure the airport and ensure its functioning as a neutral zone; to assist in the maintenance and consolidation of a ceasefire; to create conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance; and to facilitate political

reconciliation leading to the creation of an environment conducive to a peaceful settlement of the conflict through the conduct of elections. The force would operate under robust rules of engagement.

27. In their consultations with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, a number of Governments expressed willingness to participate in a force authorized by the United Nations by contributing ground troops or logistical and air transport support, and some offered specific units. Most potential contributors specified that the force should be a United Nations peacekeeping operation rather than a multinational force. No country emerged that was able and willing to assure the command, control and communications capacity, the rapid deployment capability or the ability to generate the necessary financing that would be required to assume the leadership of a multinational force.

Dispatch of technical survey team

28. The dispatch of a technical survey team to assess conditions on the ground and to assemble technical and logistical information concerning the condition and capacity of airports and other transport facilities and the availability of local services and supplies is an essential prerequisite for the deployment of a peacekeeping operation. Accordingly, after consulting with members of the Security Council, I dispatched a technical survey team to Libreville and Brazzaville on 25 July.

29. In Gabon, the team conducted a thorough survey of the airports of Libreville and Franceville, met with the representatives of the two Congolese parties and of the National Mediation Committee in Libreville and were received by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defence of Gabon.

30. In the Republic of the Congo, team members met with President Lissouba, General Sassou-Nguesso and Mr. Kolelas, as well as with the military staffs of both sides at a joint meeting. Members of the team also inspected the confrontation line, known as the "bande verte", which at that time ran from Maya Maya airport through the central business and residential district to the Congo River. During this inspection, the team was caught in a prolonged exchange of fire.

31. The team also completed a full survey of the airports and other relevant infrastructure and the servicing and supply capacity in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Mr. Bernard Miyet, briefed the Security Council on the technical and military findings of the team on 8 August.

32. The team found the humanitarian situation in Brazzaville to be cataclysmic, with at least 500,000 of the original 900,000 inhabitants having been displaced, with the consequent risks of malnutrition and the spread of disease.

33. I have since sent two military experts back to the region to assist Mr. Sahnoun in assessing military and security conditions in Brazzaville.

V. THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

34. The fighting in Brazzaville has involved the indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment of crowded neighbourhoods, causing significant loss of life, heavy material damage and large-scale population displacements. It is now feared that the number of casualties may be in the tens of thousands, while at least 500,000 people are thought to be internally displaced. Some 33,000 Congolese refugees have been registered at the Kinkole camp outside Kinshasa and are being assisted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

35. Heavy looting of shops, homes, offices and warehouses has taken place throughout the duration of the conflict. On 16 October, looters broke into the World Health Organization's regional office in Brazzaville, stealing about 50 vehicles and causing extensive damage to documents and computer data of various United Nations agencies and the loss of irreplaceable medical records from throughout the African region. The total cost of the damage and thefts are estimated in millions of dollars.

36. Brazzaville and many areas to the north have been cut off from supplies of food and other basic necessities for several months. The characteristic effects of war, displacement and overcrowding are evident in the population, including shortages of food and clothing, child malnutrition and outbreaks of communicable diseases.

37. Owing to the security situation, access to most parts of the Republic of the Congo is very difficult. All United Nations agencies have been evacuated from the capital. There is no permanent international presence in the country, except in Pointe Noire. As a result, information on the humanitarian situation is very sketchy.

38. On 1 October 1997 the World Food Programme began a large-scale food distribution exercise in Pointe Noire. The United Nations Children's Fund, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins sans frontières, is providing emergency health assistance to the displaced population in Pointe Noire. Limited emergency assistance programmes in the south were halted following the intensification of the fighting during the week of 13 October.

39. Access to the northern parts of the country, where many refugees from Rwanda and the former Zaire are located, has been extremely limited for security reasons. Until recently, Médecins sans frontières and ICRC provided basic health services in some areas. However, since 1 October, ICRC has not had access to the north. On 15 October, Médecins sans frontières was informed by the authorities in Kinshasa that it could no longer transport supplies from Kinshasa to Brazzaville. UNHCR continues to provide assistance to some 8,000 Rwandan refugees in the area of Loukolela on the Congo River. Besides the enormous security risks under which these organizations operate, the main problem is the procurement and transportation of supplies.

40. The situation is expected to worsen in the coming weeks with the onset of the rainy season. The living conditions of hundreds of thousands of people

without shelter will grow increasingly intolerable; diseases will spread more rapidly and relief operations will be hampered. In addition, many villages in the north have received large numbers of internally displaced persons, sometimes doubling the original population. This will have a severe impact on the food security of those villages.

41. If Brazzaville remains calm, large numbers of displaced persons are expected to return rapidly to the city. As the city's infrastructure has been virtually destroyed, external assistance will be required to provide for the basic needs of the returning population. In this context, the United Nations will conduct a humanitarian rapid assessment mission and initiate relief operations as soon as possible. Once the immediate requirements have been identified, a funding request will be issued to the international donor community.

VI. CONTINGENCY PLANNING

42. As the situation has evolved, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations has, on my instructions and in close cooperation with potential troop contributors as described above, developed a series of contingency plans for the possible dispatch of a peacekeeping operation to the Republic of the Congo. Planning was conducted on the assumption of a permissive environment, that is, that the parties to the conflict would agree to the deployment of a United Nations force; that a ceasefire would be in place, at least on a strategic level; that the parties would agree to United Nations control of the airport; and that they would demonstrate willingness to reach a political settlement.

43. At an informal meeting on 14 October 1997, I briefed members of the Security Council on the latest plan, which was developed immediately prior to the reports of major advances by the Sassou-Nguesso forces. Subject to the authorization of the Security Council, I proposed the initial deployment of an advance mission headquarters in Libreville. If circumstances so required, the plan then envisaged the phased deployment of peacekeeping troops in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire and at the three strategic northern locations of Impfondo, Owando and Ouesso.

44. The rapid evolution of the situation since then, however, has prompted me to review further the options for United Nations involvement. If, as indeed appears to be the case, the Republic of the Congo is now effectively controlled by the forces of General Sassou-Nguesso, there would appear to be a need to refocus the efforts of the Organization. On the other hand, a formal cessation of hostilities would not by itself guarantee the return of security to the country. It is anticipated that the military situation in the Republic of the Congo will continue to be precarious for some time owing to the existence of ill-disciplined and heavily armed militias and the uncontrolled flow of arms and matériel into the country during the conflict. Planning will therefore now focus on the urgent need to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance in what is still a volatile environment. We would also stand ready, upon request, to draw up plans for assisting with the disarming and demobilization of the militias.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

45. Continued conflict in the Republic of the Congo, especially if the involvement of foreign forces persists, would represent a clear threat to regional peace and security. The United Nations system has a duty to take the lead in efforts to relieve the suffering of the people of the Republic of the Congo and to continue to support efforts by President Bongo, the International Mediation Committee and the United Nations/OAU Special Representative, Mr. Sahnoun, to resolve the political situation there.

46. The situation calls for both emergency and longer-term measures. The statement issued by the President of the Security Council on 16 October 1997 (S/PRST/1997/47) represents a useful beginning.

47. It will now be necessary to follow up on the Council's call for a cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of foreign forces. In this connection, the Council has emphasized the importance of a political settlement, national reconciliation and the institution of arrangements leading to democratic free and fair elections with the participation of all parties. The deteriorating humanitarian situation deplored by the Council also requires urgent action to ensure the unrestricted delivery of humanitarian assistance on the basis of assurances from all parties concerning the safety of the civilian population and the security of humanitarian operations.

48. In this context, I note with satisfaction that General Sassou-Nguesso has expressed to Mr. Sahnoun his willingness to allow the humanitarian agencies access to the country and to facilitate their access to Brazzaville, and that he has stated that his forces have already begun preparing the airport for that purpose.

49. General Sassou-Nguesso has affirmed his intention to engage in a dialogue with all political leaders in order to work out transitional arrangements for governing the country. He has stated that the transitional period would be of a reasonable duration and would lead to the conduct of free and fair elections. General Sassou-Nguesso is reported to have acknowledged that he would need the assistance of the international community to rehabilitate the country and organize those elections. I am concerned, however, at reports that some members of his forces have made vengeful and belligerent statements, and I appeal to all concerned to recognize that the time for violence has passed and to act in a spirit of national reconciliation.

50. The enormous damage inflicted by the armed forces of the Congolese parties on their capital in recent months has created a need for a considerable reconstruction and rehabilitation programme. I intend to seek the views of potential donors on the role the United Nations system and bilateral donors can play in mobilizing resources for such a programme and in assisting in its implementation, which could go forward in parallel with emergency humanitarian aid efforts.

51. In the event that the United Nations is requested to provide assistance to help ensure the safety and security of humanitarian operations, I am prepared to draw up plans for a suitable United Nations presence. I will also initiate

preparations for assisting in a programme of national reconciliation leading to the conduct of free and fair elections with the participation of all parties.

52. Mr. Sahnoun is exploring ways of promoting those objectives. On the basis of his reports, I shall revert to the Security Council with a more detailed statement of needs in relation to emergency humanitarian relief, electoral assistance and a possible rehabilitation and reconstruction programme.